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ABSTRACT

The majority of current college freshmen see no place in their lives for reading as an opportunity for intellectual or emotional enjoyment. They read only the most utilitarian texts--appliance instructions or road signs, for example. A teacher cannot "make" students read anything, but he or she can help them find ways to like reading; one goal of a teacher should be to help students take responsibility for their own learning. Three general suggestions can be incorporated into writing classes to turn students into self-motivated readers: (1) help them recognize and question the speaker in the text; (2) persuade them to respond to books just as they respond to each other's writing--by commenting in the margins and by underlining words they find interesting or confusing to return to later; and (3) introduce them to non-traditional texts (such as Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"). No other class is as small and flexible as the composition class, where students have an opportunity to write at length about their reading reactions, questions, and discoveries. The teacher can help these non-readers discover that the world of books belongs to them too. (NKA)

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Teaching Freshmen Non-readers, the A-literate Majority

"Reading is a bore," most students tell me. Almost without exception they talk of it as a necessary evil, like a visit to the dentist. If they did not have to read, they would not, and indeed, they do not when they are out of school. These students are not illiterate. Rather, they simply see no place in their lives for anything but the most utilitarian kind of reading--the kind that enables them to make sense of road signs, say, or appliance instructions. Why should we read literature when we can see the same stories on TV? one student asked me. Why can't we just get all the facts listed on a single sheet of paper instead of having to pick them out of an article? asked another. Why read any more than we have to? After all, they tell me, once we have our degrees most of us won't have to read anything, except office memos and maybe newspapers. These are the opinions of seventeen and eighteen year old freshmen non-readers, whom I call the a-literate majority. They are a-literate because they see no place in their lives for reading as an opportunity for intellectual or emotional stimulation, growth, or enjoyment. They are a majority because they far outnumber those who read as college students must and as educated citizens should. They are, in fact, the middle-American norm. The so-called average students, whom I've met as a teacher in a large mid-western university. In the years immediately prior to entering the university, these students read

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CS 210 392

as little as possible--a habit they try to continue in college. A startling number of them have not read an entire book since junior high or grade school. What can we do to encourage them to make reading a vital part of their lives? How can we teach them into what some call "post-functional" literacy?

Before approaching such questions, I'd like to frame my discussion by stressing that my aim as teacher is to help students take responsibility for their own learning, so they can continue reading and writing and growing intellectually long after they have left the university. Because, above all, what students need is not an armload of rules and skills, but time, practice, and experience--more time and practice than we can give them in one or two semesters. As for experience, that must be their own. So, I'd like to begin by discussing the experience of reading: What should good readers get from the text? We may agree that a good reader should be able to understand what he or she reads. But how do we measure a reader's comprehension or understanding? Psycholinguist Frank Smith, for instance, suggests that comprehension is a psychological state that cannot be objectively verified. That is, what I find meaningful in the text may be something quite trivial to you. And your telling me I misread the text, that I did not get "it" at all, will not enlighten me so much as alienate me. Take "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" as an example. It's a story about a spoiled little girl who breaks into a house, steals food, vandalizes property, then gets away scot free. No, it's about a tired, hungry, possibly lost

little girl who is seeking shelter and sustenance. No, it's not about a girl at all, it's about three bears.... Well, I could go on and on. The point, obviously, is that while we may agree that there is a house, a girl, some porridge, and three bears in this story, we may not agree on what the story "means." This holds true for much non-fiction as well as fiction. Our interpretation of literary events, like our interpretation of life, depends on who we are and how we view the world.

Reading, in other words, is a personal experience. It has as much to do with what we bring to the text as what the text itself offers. When we come upon the words "big yellow house," for example, the words do nothing until we enliven them with thought and imagination. We draw on our experience with houses and our concepts of size and color, and we build in our imagination something we deem appropriately big and house-like and yellowish. But no two reader-constructed houses will be alike: mine may be bigger than yours; yours may be made of stone and mine of wood; mine may be on a mountain, yours on a plain; and so on. In other words, the reality of the reading is different for each of us because each reader brings different experiences, different expectations, and different needs to the text. What we make of the text, then, often depends on what happens to be important to us at the time. That is why a book I read at 19 will seem quite a different book, and will make quite a different reading experience, when I am 40. What we do with reading and what reading does to us--that is, our reading experiences--grow and change as we grow and change. As our cognitive capacity expands, as we gain more worldly experience and more textual experience, we

make more or less of the things we read. Reading, then, like writing and like thinking, is a developmental process. It is not simply a "skill" we use to extract information from the container of the text. It is an interchange in which the reader gives to and takes from the writer as the writer gives to and takes from the reader. It demands not only the reader's attention but the reader's personal investment of thought, experience, and imagination.

Since reading is developmental, a quintessential part of intellectual growth in this society, how can we possibly make our non-reading freshmen into college-level readers within one or two semesters? How can these students make up for years of neglect in so short a time? The truth is, they can't. And, the bleaker truth is that we can't make our students read anything--really read it--unless they want to. We can, however, help them find ways to like reading. Help them find ways to like reading. That sounds simplistic. But consider: unless these students learn to like reading, they will do as little of it as possible in college; and when they leave college, they will leave reading altogether. It is as simple as that. I offer, then, three very general suggestions which can be incorporated into writing classes in an effort to give students the opportunity, the encouragement, and the environment that will allow them to become self-motivated readers.

1) Let's help students recognize and question the speaker in the text. As you read, I tell my students, try to hear the voice of the person who is talking to you on paper. What do

you make of that speaker? Is she happy? sad? serious? How can you tell? Questions like these remind students that reading is an act of communication, not simply a matter of extracting "facts" from the container of the text. Reading, I tell them, is like a conversation. It is an interchange: the speaker affects each of us in certain ways and we respond. This conversational model is an attempt to find the fundamental link between the students' lives and the lives of books, so to speak. Students, for example, may have little experience reading, but they have had a tremendous amount of experience talking and listening. Like all human beings, they possess innate psychological and linguistic faculties that enable them to make sense of the things they say and hear. And, as speakers and listeners, they have grown familiar with a great number of linguistic and textual conventions. Most of these students, for instance, know when a story sounds like a story, but they don't know why it sounds that way. What they need is not rules but awareness--awareness of the abilities they already possess and sensitivity to the experience they may yet gain.

I ask my students to respond to books, and other published texts, just as they respond to each other's writing. As they read with pencil in hand, they write their reactions in the margins of the text, reponding much as they would in a conversation, commenting, exclaiming, complaining, suggesting, and so on. They also circle or underline thoughts or words they find interesting, frustrating, or confusing so they can return to these later for further comment. This form of

reader response was introduced to me by Lou Kelly, Director of the University of Iowa Writing Lab. It works, I think, and it works well because it gets students physically involved in the act of reading; and it stresses their role as constructors of meaning; for they use their textual notes to summarize and interpret--for themselves--what they read; and later they use this writing to compare notes with other readers in the class and discuss differences of opinion and interpretation. Obviously the speaker in the text cannot respond to the students' comments, but the act of response helps diminish the seeming immutabilty of the text and the god-like authority of the author. These textual conversations encourage students to read skeptically: their questions and comments are a first step toward critical thinking. If you don't like what you're reading, find out why, I tell my students. No text is sacred in my class and no author goes unquestioned. Which brings me to my second suggestion.

Let's allow students to negotiate their interpretations of the things they read. Traditionally, teachers have determined not only what texts are worth reading, but also what meanings are worth talking about. But it is not enough that students ask the questions that I, as an experienced reader, would have them ask. In fact, it is often downright unreasonable of me to expect them to, since most students are too textually inexperienced to see in the text what I would like them to see. Certainly I should offer my suggestions and my teacherly perspectives. But until students are allowed to ask their own questions, for their own reasons, to satisfy their own often

unacademic needs, they will not find reading meaningful; and they will not start thinking for themselves. For critical thinking demands independence and experimentation. It demands trial and error. Too often teachers have been so concerned with getting things "right," they have forgotten that getting things "wrong" can be just as productive. A teacher who spends his or her time trying to protect the author's authority and defend a handful of "right" interpretations may succeed only in shutting students up in class and shutting students out of reading altogether.

Students need to be left alone a little to ponder, question, and debate interpretations among themselves. They need a chance to see their own investments pay off. This does not mean that I can't join students in a collaborative effort to make sense of the reading. It means, rather, that I will be as flexible as I would have my students be. It means that I would rather see students make their own discoveries than grudgingly adopt mine. It means that I prize genuine, and even idiosyncratic, interest over coerced conformity.

My final suggestion is that we introduce our students to non-traditional texts; that is, books other than, or in addition to, the traditional essay anthologies. Specifically, I suggest book-length works of non-fiction, such as Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, an autobiographical account of a black girl's life, or Robyn Davis's Tracks, a young woman's story of her trek alone across the Australian Outback with three camels. Such books show students that reading is not confined simply to

so-called fun stuff, like People magazine, or so-called formal stuff, like history and math texts. To their surpise students begin to see that there exists an entirely different world of reading that combines the expressive with the reportorial, the imaginative with the factual, the editorial with the objective, and so on. It's important that these texts be book-length because that is the form of reading these students are least acquainted with and most intimidated by. Most important, non-traditional texts often offer writers who have strong voices and who speak of experiences students are familiar or sympathetic with, such as growing up or adapting to a new environment or coping with social pressures. Since almost all of these students are expecting the worst from college texts, it is vital that their first book-length reading experience be as engaging as possible. A book whose theme parallels, in a general way, the students' situation as strangers in a strange place, for instance, stands a good chance of stirring interest.

The composition class may be our students' last chance to find a way into the world of reading. For no other class in the university is as small and as flexible; no other class can offer the same sense of community and support as students undertake, for the first time in years, the task of reading a book-length text. And, most important, no other class will give students the opportunity to write at length about their readerly reactions and questions and discoveries. But, as I have been suggesting, students won't read and they won't write unless they have motivations that reach beyond the utilitarian

demands of academics. Reading and writing lead to more than facts and figures. Our challenge as teachers is not to tell this to students but to show it, to create opportunities that will allow them to discover that self-involving reading and writing are a vital part of intellectual and emotional growth. "Before this class, I used to hate reading," one student told me, "but now I'm reading things just for the heck of it. It's not even something I think about--I just do it. It's kind of surprising," she said. It is my hope that we can surprise the majority of students in a similar manner, helping these non-readers discover that the world of books belongs as much to them as to us. This, I think, is the first important step toward "post-functional" literacy.